



Steve Fielding **Family First** Senator for Victoria



Speech by Senator Steve Fielding Family First Senator for Victoria

Second Reading Speech

Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005

9 December 2005

This issue has been a vexed one for me and for Family First.

I have looked at this issue on its merits and I genuinely believe the argument can run both ways – to retain compulsory student union fees or abolish them.

I have been asked constantly for my views about this legislation and, for many days and weeks, have given an honest answer, telling my parliamentary colleagues, the media and my constituents, that I have not made up my mind on the Bill.

I have had a great deal of trouble deciding on this legislation because there are strong advocates on both sides mounting good cases.

Family First has met with a range of groups including the Australian Campus Union Manager's Association at RMIT in Melbourne as well as Sydney University Sport.

I have listened to arguments by the Education Minister and the Prime Minister. I have also spoken with the Opposition Leader and met with the Shadow Minister for Education.

I have had numerous delegations in my office ranging from the National Union of Students to Christian student groups to the Australian Vice Chancellors Committee.

While this Bill is about an issue that is close to the hearts of many Coalition members, that is not something that bothers me.

I am not fussed by the noise surrounding this issue, nor interested in the politics.

The matters I have been pondering include what is education and what is the purpose of education, what services should be provided at tertiary institutions and who should pay for them, what obligations do tertiary institutions have and whether people at tertiary institutions receive preferential treatment in terms of access to subsidised services that others in the community do not have.

I am also conscious of the need to promote higher education and access to higher education, particularly for people from the outer suburbs and regional areas.

Family First believes this Bill raises two central issues.

The first is compulsory student unionism – whether students should have to be members of unions or associations.

The second issue is whether students should be required to pay a compulsory fee for services and whether those services are an essential part of a university experience.

There are a range of conditions under which students pay amenities and services fees. Part-time students, those at regional campuses or studying off-campus usually pay less than full-time students at metropolitan campuses.

Most universities do not require membership of a student union, or provide an exemption for students who do not want to join a student union.

However, all students are required to pay the compulsory charge.

Family First is opposed to compulsory unionism and believes students should have the freedom to choose whether they belong to a union or any club or association.

In relation to paying compulsory fees, the question we need to ask is whether, if we abolish compulsory fees, we will cut out many of the services that exist on universities.

How many of these services would continue without a compulsory fee and how many are really essential?

Do any of these services mean the difference between a student being able to attend a university or not?

I am persuaded by the argument that many services would not continue in the same form if this Bill was passed.

But it is argued that services that students really want – and need - will continue.

Current and former university students have told me of their frustration at having to pay a compulsory fee for services they have never used.

Others have spoken passionately about the need to subsidise services such as legal advice, housing assistance, counselling and childcare, and how important these are to students, particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as some mature age students, such as single parents returning to study.

In Victoria, student fees range from about \$130 to \$440 per year, which is a lot of money to many students and many families.

I remember when I was an engineering student. Being one of 16, I am fully aware of how a compulsory amenities fee can stretch people and I can understand how students would prefer to spend the money elsewhere.

Are we imposing hardship on some students right now?

These are the sorts of issues I have been considering, as well as trying to ponder the possible consequences if this Bill is passed – particularly what might be the unintended consequences.

Mr President, I have found it difficult to focus on the issue given the overloaded legislative schedule we have had in the Senate this past fortnight.

I ended up locking my office door last night, because a number of colleagues – all well meaning – kept dropping in to offer advice and it was difficult to focus on the details of last night's legislation program!

While it has been hard to find time for quiet contemplation, I have been able to weigh up these issues, clarify these views and finally arrive at a decision.

I have also put all these politics and noise aside. As I said at the outset, all I have focussed on is the merits of the Bill before us – nothing else.

And when Family First votes, let me stress that Family First will be voting on this Bill alone – nothing else.